

The Peculiar (and Abandoned) Pedestrian Walkways of Charleston, West Virginia



Back in 2016, we passed through Charleston, WV on our way to Williamsburg, VA. It seemed like a nice place with its downtown and Capitol Building nestled in the valley below the highway, but there was a certain structure that caught my eye. We drove under a series of unique walkways connected to highway ramps that looked dated, maybe even abandoned. These weren't simple sidewalks, these were a series of ramps wrapped in anti-suicide cages connected by staircases and protected from the elements with 70's era lighting and glass. In all the American cities I'd been to, I'd never seen any urban element quite like it.



- Charleston's overpass walkways as seen from the interstate.

In a way, they were like skywalks, but instead of connecting various downtown buildings it seemed to just be an elaborate pedestrian link from Charleston's downtown to the hillside neighborhood separated by the highway. To top it off, the structures looked dilapidated and grimy with no one walking on them. I wondered if they were just victims of no aesthetic maintenance or if they were disused. A few quick Google searches didn't reveal anything and I forgot about them after we passed them once more on the drive home. At the end of 2017, though, we had plans to stop in Charleston and I wanted to see these things up close. So on a snowy morning, we went to investigate some curiosity.



- Tower 1.

The walkway system runs from the first tower near the West Virginia Market place, an indoor/outdoor public market. Stairs take users a few flights up to a walkway connected to a highway exit ramp.



- Detail of the fencing surrounding the walkway alongside the highway exit ramp.

Caged fencing completely surrounds the pathway which then heads northeast over railroad tracks towards a second tower, the base of which connects to a more industrial part of town near a Honda dealer and garden outlet.



- Towers 2 and 3 as seen from tower 1.



- Tower 2.



- Tower 2.



- Tower 1 as seen from tower 2.

If you keep following the pathway, it'll take you over Interstates 77 and 64 to a third tower planted in a grassy berm between highway roads. This tower features the same enclosed stairways and lighting as the other two, connecting the pathway to a set of hillside steps which eventually end in a neighborhood atop the hill. That's the best description I can give from looking at the thing on Google Maps, because you can't actually walk this pathway.



- Tower 3 and hillside steps as seen from tower 2.



- Tower 3.

Starting at the first tower, we found it completely sealed off. No lights were on and welded sheet metal with no openings seems to be doing its job of keeping everyone out.

Driving to the second tower, the local Honda dealer has placed showpiece vehicles right up against the tower's base. Similar sealed entrances can be found here and the whole thing would seem like nothing more than a highway support were it not for the stairs and dark glass. The concrete supports and their decorative lighting scream of the late 60's and early 70's. Looking up, the chainlink fence pathways are rusting and feature an orange/brown hue.

Looking over at the third tower, you can see that the glass doesn't surround the entire set of stairs. It's open to the elements in some parts. Unable to reach that tower, we drove up to the end of the pathway.



The hillside neighborhood isn't like the ones you'd find in Cincinnati's Mt. Adams or Pittsburgh's Mt. Washington, it's a purely residential area. It's nice, filled with typical mid-20th Century suburban style homes that just happen to have a nice view of the urban core below. There's no bars or businesses in the immediate vicinity of the overpass walkway, just houses.

A sign at the top of the stairs states: "Overpass Walkway Closed," but there's nothing keeping you from walking down the stairs along the hillside. Typical concrete steps with metal railings found in other hilly cities wind down towards the third tower. Vegetation has grown wild over this area, something easily navigated when the winter cold keeps it from growing. At the bottom of the stairs, the chain link fencing begins and descends a bit further, above the highway, to the third tower. However, a massive piece of metal keeps anyone from walking the path.





It's still possible to walk from this neighborhood to Downtown Charleston in a round about way, but this pedestrian path once gave direct access and a shortcut. At the same time, I wondered what kind of frequent trips needed to be made between a purely residential neighborhood and an industrial section of Downtown. To be fair, the final section between towers 1 and 2 could link pedestrians with the local market and within a block of the minor league baseball stadium. Figuring the whole walkway dated back a few decades, I admired the Charleston urban planner's foresight and creativity in trying to link the downtown with a nearby neighborhood, but I wondered why it was no longer used.





A resident walking his dog at the top of the stairs as I climbed back up kind of clued me in. “The homeless were using it as a bathroom,” he said. He had no idea how long it had been closed down, but that’s what he had heard was the reason for closure. While the pathway’s unique shelters gave some protection from the elements for pedestrians, I could definitely see how they’d be utilized as shelter for those experiencing homelessness. I’m not aware of the issue in Charleston and overall that’s a broader topic for another day, but that kind of perception can lead to poor reputations for parts of urban environments.

I still couldn’t find any information about the walkway on the internet such as to when it was built, when it closed, or why. A topic I started on Reddit yielded only one response, with someone stating:

"I don't know when it was built, it was before my time (born and raised in CRW here), but it was closed sometime in the early 90s. The areas it connects, both at the street level and up on the hill were notorious for being rather seedy with drug users, prostitution and homeless people. I think there were a few assaults....robberies and rapes....that ended there and that was why it was closed."

There seems to be some moves being made in Charleston to improve cycling and pedestrian access throughout the city, but this overpass walkway doesn't seem to be a priority for anyone. Nor does anyone seem to miss the access it provided. No one (online at least) even mentions it at all. Nevertheless, it’s a unique abandoned

structure hanging over the highway, a remnant of past urban planning theories, a creative way to try and bridge the disconnect created by the Interstate.



- Blocked access to the rest of the walkway and towers.



- Detail of the metal keeping the walkway from being used.

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Andrew Walsh 6 years ago · 0 Likes

Very interesting; thanks for the tour/investigation. That would be a pretty cool walkway to resurrect if they made it a priority. I wonder if the lack of business destinations in the connected neighborhood is a factor. Also strange that there's seemingly so little information out there on something that's so noticeable.

Preview Post Reply



Ronny Salerno 6 years ago · 0 Likes

That could most definitely be a factor. My understanding is that the revived market/ballpark are relatively newer attractions. Thanks for checking it out!

Preview Post Reply



mvantryke 4 years ago · 0 Likes

Excellent info! Just what I was searching for. Big Thanks. The wife and I were visiting 'Charlie West' from the other Queen City (Charlotte) a few years ago, and I could not help but wonder what the deal was with this closed-off, multi-tower pedestrian overpass. It seems that the neighborhood up on the hill (Sunset Drive) may be making a bit of a comeback, as many of the homes have great city/valley/mtn. views. Wonder if they will reopen it someday. Thanks again.

Preview Post Reply



Ronny Salerno 4 years ago · 0 Likes

Hey there, thanks for stopping by. How'd you enjoy Charleston? Would love to see this connection restored, ended up visiting that market at the bottom a few years later. Great spot.

Preview Post Reply



Dan 3 years ago · 0 Likes

Thanks for the great information! I've passed under that bridge dozens of times since I was a kid, as we traveled to and from Ohio to the south. Back in the 70s and 80s it was certainly an impressive sight. Very modern and unique looking, and it always got my imagination going (where did to go to and from??). Considering the huge amount of long-distance interstate traffic that travels through that area, it was a great method for the state to show off to out of state travelers. I remember it being well lit at night as well back in those days.

Interestingly, while searching for information about the walkway (and finding this blog), I also found news articles discussing the more recent closure of another pedestrian bridge in Charleston. Google "Dunbar council votes to close problem pedestrian bridge" for more information. I wonder if there were similar motivations to close the bridge over the interstate as well?

Preview Post Reply



Chris 3 years ago · 0 Likes

Thanks for writing this. I've seen these for years but didn't know they were closed. Thank you for the info!

Preview Post Reply



Ronny Salerno 3 years ago · 0 Likes

Thanks for checking it out, glad it helped!

Preview Post Reply



Jordan Lewis 3 years ago · 0 Likes

I was born, raised and spent 25 years in Charleston. I've been obsessed with the pedestrian bridge since I was a kid, but never really got a straight answer about what it was for or when it was operational. On a vacation back home to visit family last week, I finally learned about Charleston's triangle district, it's demolition for the construction of inner city overpasses of I-64/70/77 in the '70s (google it, there is actually lots of info out there) and this spurred an obsessive Charleston history binge on my part, plus a free trial of newspapers.com. Note that Broad Street was renamed to Leon Sullivan Way in 2000 (<https://www.wvstateu.edu/about/history-and-traditions/leon-sullivan.aspx>). See Paragraphs 4 & 6 of this Daily Mail Article

(<https://i.imgur.com/0lBrpje.png>). It appears that the overpass was built when The Kanawha & Michigan Railroad operated a rail depot on Smith Street (today the Capitol Market (<https://capitolmarket.net/about/>)) with "8 or 9 tracks" for pedestrians to cross, perhaps people who worked near Smith Street but lived in the residential Sunset Drive?. At the time the overpass was considered "Temporary", until the court street underpass (now Piedmont Road?) was completed. The tracks were probably demolished (only 2 remain today) and people may have driven this underpass instead, leading to the overpass's disuse, neglect and closure. These are just my very armchair historian 2 cents, but you might have more success searching for a "Broad Street Overpass" online rather than Leon Sullivan Way.

Preview Post Reply



Ronny Salerno 3 years ago · 0 Likes

Jordan, thank you so much for this insight. Super helpful in painting some context on these things!

Preview Post Reply



Jeremy A year ago · 0 Likes

Just an FYI, they just announced that they will be tearing the pedestrian bridge down. The project should be complete by November 2023. <https://www.wowktv.com/news/local/troubled-pedestrian-bridge-in-charleston-to-be-demolished/>

Preview Post Reply



Ronny Salerno A year ago · 0 Likes

Hey Jeremy, thanks for the update! I'll amend the article.

Preview Post Reply



Deborah Woodson 8 months ago · 0 Likes

The walkway was closed due to a woman being murdered. Everything else has come afterwards. We the neighborhood are thankful that it's coming down.almost finished.

This walkway replaced our old steps, bc of Interstate. It was a way for all to use. The area before I64 ,I77. Was easy walking to town, school.

Preview Post Reply



Cara 3 months ago · 0 Likes

I lived in the hilltop neighborhood (called Capital Hill) from the late-60s to mid-80s. Prior to the early 70s, there was no interstate so the hill had a gradual slope from the neighborhood to downtown Charleston (Capital Street). There was a single, straight, concrete (open air) set of steps that went from the neighborhood to downtown. No railings, just steps flanked by grass and wildflowers. We used to walk down it all the time. It was a comfortable walk but it was long. Maybe a half a mile. It was a straight shot to downtown. Then they decided to put in an interstate right where that gradual grade part of the hill was. They dynamited it. I remember the massive explotions ripping the hill out and creating a steep cliff where the gradual slope used to be. While

they were blasting and building the interstate we had no way to get to downtown anymore. Except the long way around from the back side of the hill entrance, adding a couple of miles to the walk. After years, they finally finished the interstate and they built the twisting, covered walkway you narrated in your article. Within the first year that it was built a friend who lived on the hill was raped in the stairwell. We never walked down the steps again. If we ever wanted to go downtown, we'd ride our bikes. So the walkway was a complete failure. From the beginning it was almost immediately abandoned. Homeless people lived in it for years. Like the guy at the top of the stairs told you, it always smelled like urine, if you were brave enough to walk to its entrance. Maybe after 5 years or so, they closed it off. Maybe it was too expensive to destroy it. Who knows.

Preview Post Reply



Ronny Salerno · 3 months ago · 0 Likes

Cara,

Thanks so much for sharing your local perspective and personal insight. I'm so sorry to hear of your friend's assault—what a tragic, terrible thing.

Preview Post Reply



Dan · 3 weeks ago · 0 Likes

Just to confirm, it is was gone as of Nov 11, 2023. Looked again Jan 3, 2024 and I couldn't see any signs of where it had been (when driving through on the interstate). Your page is more important than ever as the physical bridge is now totally gone. I would have like to have flown my drone over it and gotten detailed footage, but it was gone by the time I went through Charleston a few months ago. - Dan (I commented here 3 years ago as well).